

# ‘Through the keyhole’: love and literature in Pliny’s life of letters

Katherine Clarke

*If I am giving a reading she sits behind a curtain near by and greedily drinks in every word of appreciation.*

So Pliny describes his devoted wife, Calpurnia, in a letter to her aunt (4.19). In many ways Calpurnia fulfils the ideal of a perfect Roman wife, as can be reconstructed from inscriptions on Roman tombstones:

*Stranger, what I have to say is short. Stop and read it through. This is the unlovely tomb of a lovely woman. Her parents named her Claudia. She loved her husband with her whole heart. She bore two sons, one of whom she leaves on earth; the other she’s placed beneath the earth. She was charming in conversation, yet her conduct was appropriate. She kept house; she made wool.*

Pliny’s wife, like Claudia here, is a domestic goddess and a loving wife. Another more notorious Roman woman, Sempronia, who was supposedly involved in Cataline’s conspiracy to overthrow the state in 63 B.C., was similarly ‘charming in conversation’, though her conduct was not so appropriate. Sallust, the first-century B.C. historian, describes Sempronia in some detail in his account of the conspiracy. She was fortunate in her birth and her beauty, in her husband and her children – a beautiful, well-born woman, with a nice family in tow. But Sempronia’s lack of modesty was legendary. She was so fired up with passion that ‘she more often went looking for men than was looked for by them’. She was, in other words, the polar opposite of the Penelope-style figure of our tombstone.

## Women and literature

But in spite of her wickedness, Sempronia was ‘of not inconsiderable intelligence’; she was well-versed in Greek and Latin literature, she could play the lyre and dance, the perfectly accomplished ‘Victorian’ lady. She could write poetry, she could tell a joke, she could engage in conversation which was modest, or tender, or saucy; in short, she was ‘a woman of great wit and charm.’ The problem was not her engagement in the world of literature, polite conversation, and musical entertainment, but that she could do these things ‘more gracefully than a decent woman should’.

Furthermore, Sempronia’s literary accomplishments went hand-in-hand with her sexual indiscretions. By contrast, Pliny was certain that his wife’s intellectual ambitions were a result of her devotion to him:

*This love has given her an interest in literature; she keeps copies of my works, she reads them again and again, she even learns them by heart... She has even set my verses to music and sings them, to the accompaniment of her lyre, with no musician to teach her but the best of masters, love.*

This appreciation by a Roman woman of the life of learned leisure, in this case, filtered through her role as devoted wife of

a literary star, was not unique among Pliny’s circle. His letter to Rosianus Geminus (7.24) mourning the death of the 79 year old, Ummidia Quadratilla, reveals an eccentric and colourful character, somewhere between the transgressive Sempronia and the over-dutiful Calpurnia. While Ummidia kept herself entertained by her troupe of mime artists who gave performances both at her home and at major public festivals, she was insistent on the value of a proper education for her hard-working, straight-laced grandson, who was kept hard at work on his books while his grandmother partied. Pliny gently ribs Ummidia for indulging her entertainers more lavishly than she should have done as an upper class woman – faint echoes of Sempronia here. But the saving grace was that she kept the interests of her industrious grandson at heart and always sent him off to do his work before enjoying her leisure pursuits.

## Watching from the sidelines

Although Roman women clearly could engage in the world of leisure and literature, the proper place for Pliny’s wife was behind a curtain. So, our question is not so much what did Calpurnia do, but what world could she glimpse? We can use the many letters of Pliny which deal with the subject of literary circles and reading parties to build up a picture of this world. Pliny was clearly proud of his place alongside the other literary figures of the day. His correspondents include the biographer, Suetonius, and Tacitus, the great orator, lawyer, and historian. Pliny is keen to promote himself as Tacitus’ equal, providing just as useful critical feedback to the historian as Tacitus could offer Pliny – ‘a fair exchange which we both enjoy’ – and delighting in the fact that ‘whenever conversation turns to literature, our names are mentioned together’ (7.20). It is less clear that Tacitus would have been so thrilled by the association!

Pliny gives us many glimpses into his acceptance into the circle of writers who would read each other’s compositions before publication in order to offer expert criticism before it was too late. He was keen to establish himself as a man with a literary opinion worth consulting. When his friend, Fuscus Salinator, asks for advice on how best to spend his holiday in educational pursuits, Pliny’s answer (7.9) is that Fuscus should translate passages of Greek into Latin and Latin into Greek, revise some speeches, write history, poetry, and letters – perhaps more than Fuscus bargained for! And Pliny is not slow to advertise through his published letters the positive reactions given by expert friends to his own work; indeed his delight in his own literary prowess is often hard to disguise. Of the positive reaction received by one of his efforts at composing poetry, he writes to Pontius Allifanus (7.4):

*My verses are read and copied, they are even sung, and set to the cithara or lyre by Greeks who have learned Latin out of liking for my little book. But I must not boast...!*

### Never a dull moment

How does Pliny find time for all this literary activity in amongst writing letters of recommendation, setting up charitable foundations such as schools and libraries, and hobnobbing with the rich and famous? He does it by turning his leisure (*otium*) into part of his job (*negotium*) as an upper-class Roman and using it profitably as a way of confirming his place in Roman society. Literature was not a form of escapism; it was a pleasurable duty for those who belonged to a certain sector of society. As such it had to be advertised in order to be worth doing at all. The back-stage exchanges of ideas and criticisms between Pliny and his various literary friends through correspondence was not enough. More visible displays of membership of this élite literary club were required.

Some of Pliny's letters give us an insight into the world of public readings – important opportunities to display one's learning, culture, and social superiority. His letter to Sosius Senecio (1.13) describes a bumper crop of talented poets, which resulted in hardly a day going by one April without someone giving a public reading. This flood of literary brilliance was clearly taking its toll on the patience of the audiences; the boredom factor was setting in. One could clearly have too much of a good thing. Pliny describes people sitting gossiping outside, asking to be told when the reading is nearly over so that they can dawdle in for the last few minutes, as though they had been there all along; or others who try to slip out early undetected. Hardly a surprise, given that some recitations went on for several days (4.27)! Martial too, the writer of epigrams in the late first century A.D., paints a picture of quite how demanding a schedule was imposed by the need to listen to recitations. He complains (10.70) that he does not have time to write more than one book each year because he often spends the whole day listening to poetry.

### The inner circle

But this picture of open readings, with people dropping in and out, sits alongside the rather more exclusive displays of high culture offered to select circles of friends by invitation only. Pliny (9.34) describes to the biographer, Suetonius, a small private reading party which he is planning for his friends, and at which a freedman will be asked to perform Pliny's verses, since he himself has been told he is bad at reading verses out loud – a delicate and potentially awkward occasion reserved for Pliny's close friends only. On other occasions the recitation seems to have been built into a more appealing evening out. In 9.36, for example, he writes to Fuscus Salinator about his daily routine when on holiday in Tuscany. Days spent composing literature at the same time as going for walks, sitting on the terrace, lying in the bath, and so on, are rounded off by an evening spent having dinner with his wife and small groups of friends, at which readings and musical performances are given: a world of more restricted readings, held in private houses.

### A privileged access

Although Calpurnia failed to fulfil one aspect of the perfect vision of a Roman woman – she produced no children – nevertheless she was still the ideal wife for Pliny in more ways than one. She was the perfectly devoted, domesticated wife, as so many Roman women, celebrated on their tombstones by their loved ones, seem to have been. But she was also a woman who engaged in the world of letters in just the right way. She knew the limitations on her participation in the world of aristocratic displays; she was interested and well-informed, but not in the precocious manner of Sempronia or even the harmless but brash style of Ummidia Quadratilla. No, Calpurnia knew her place; well-informed companion when Pliny was hosting exclusive private literary occasions, and present even at her husband's

more public performances, but discreetly hidden behind a curtain. That way, for Pliny, she could play the perfect uncritical audience, praising his efforts to the skies, never bored, ever adoring, recording the compliments paid by his friends, living the life of letters but as a form of devotion.

Of course, Pliny's literary activity was self-consciously depicted for readers by the man himself in the letters that he published to provide glimpses into his life: a 'man of letters' presenting his life in letters. But here he chooses to give his self-portrayal as belonging to the élite literary circles of Rome, several of whose members are even now known to us through their writings, additional depth, poignancy, and interest by filtering it through the eyes of his wife, whom we see only through Pliny's own idealising eyes. If we sit with Calpurnia behind the curtain admiring Pliny, but also step back to look through the keyhole onto the scene containing both figures, then Pliny, through his published letters, successfully directs our gaze onto the ideal marriage epitomised by the roles played by each partner in the reading party: the performer and the audience, love and literature perfectly combined.

*Katherine Clarke teaches Ancient History at St Hilda's College Oxford and edited **Omnibus** 47 and 48 at the same time as Greece and Rome!*